

What the far-right thinks of Europe

Ever since its conception, the process of European integration has proven to be a divisive issue for political parties. One might think, for example, of the British Conservative party's divisions over Europe, or of the differing attitudes of the French socialists at the time of the Constitutional referendum of 2005. 'Europe', however, has been a divisive issue even for parties that one would naturally expect to oppose a supranational construction.

This has been the case for the European far-right. While parties of this political belief share a common ['nativist' ideology](#) (Mudde 2007), which would lead one to expect them to reject or at least show only a moderate interest in Europe as an idea, the reality of their understanding of Europe is more complex than the term 'euroscepticism' suggests. In fact, two languages coexist within the political discourse of the European far-right: on one hand, there is a (familiar, albeit relatively new) opposition to the European Union as a concrete form of political collaboration. On the other hand, however, far-right parties express a measure of attachment to 'Europe' as a civilisation and culture. Thus, a politician such as Marine Le Pen could, at the same time, suggest that the EU is a "[prison for its peoples](#)" and claim [in a speech](#) that: "For us, Europe is not an idea. Europe is a culture, it's a civilization with its values, its codes, its great men, its accomplishments its masterpieces. For us, Europe is not only a history but also a geography, where Turkey does not belong. Europe is a series of peoples whose respective identities exhale the fecund diversity of the continent [...] I believe in a common destiny of the nations and peoples of Europe impregnated by the millenary civilization that they share".

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[In my research](#), I seek to move beyond the idea of 'euroscepticism' and explore the component elements of the far-right's discourse on 'Europe', intended both as a distinct civilisation and as the EU. Focusing on the French National Front(FN) and the Italian Social Movement (MSI), I argue that when these parties speak and have spoken about Europe, they talk about three things: identity, liberty and existential threats. Together, they point towards the existence of a distinct far-right conception of Europe, based on a romanticised view of a European civilisation under threat.

First and foremost, Europe in its 'civilisation' form is conceived as a form of identification. Both the MSI and the FN demonstrate an attachment to the distinct civilisation that is Europe. The MSI, for example, spoke in favour of European unity conscious of the "community of interests and destinies, of history, of civilisation, of tradition among Europeans" (MSI 1980), while Jean-Marie Le Pen spoke of Europe as "A historic, geographic, cultural,

economic and social ensemble. It is an entity destined for action (Le Pen 1984)". This view of Europe' as a distinct civilisation is still present in the current National Front, in spite of its president's strong opposition to the EU. Most importantly, the parties not only consider themselves as part of this civilisation, they also see it as compatible with their national identity.

Second, parties frequently associate talk about Europe with talk about liberty. The association between the two terms, however, changes significantly through time and is affected by the historic events taking place in Europe today. Thus, particularly in the 1980s, the FN and the MSI spoke of Europe as a space in need of 'liberty' in face of the 'twin imperialisms' of the USA and the USSR. This was also associated with the need to recreate a Europe that was free to act in the external realm. In other words, Europe as an international power. From the end of the 1980s, however, and particularly for the FN, 'liberty' shifts from being an attribute of Europe to being an endangered part of the national heritage. As a result of Maastricht, in fact, the National Front starts speaking increasingly about 'sovereignty' as the freedom of self-rule, and the limits imposed on it by the European Union.

We are faced with a specific far-right narrative of Europe, which presents a romanticised image of the continent, but which also sounds almost familiar by drawing on elements of Europe's history such as its status and place in the world, its distinctiveness *vis-à-vis* other civilisations and its potential (and need) to come together in close union

The final element underlying the parties' view of Europe is the idea of an endangered civilisation; a position it shares with its constituent nations. In the 1980s, the most immediate threats were of an external nature, with the USSR occupying a prominent position in the parties' minds, closely followed by the USA. However, there was also space for concern about the 'internal decline' of Europe, brought about by corrupt political classes, demographic decline and foreign immigration. More recently, the National Front has found a new existential threat in the form of globalisation and its treacherous vector: the European Union. While the nature of the threat may vary across parties and across time, Europe and its nations always appear to be threatened by some evil force that requires swift intervention – most clearly, by the 'enlightened' patriots of Europe.

Summing up, it appears that far-right parties maintain a view of Europe as a distinct civilisation. In this sense, we are faced with a specific far-right narrative of Europe, which presents a romanticised image of the continent, but which also sounds almost familiar by drawing on elements of Europe's history such as its status and place in the world, its distinctiveness *vis-à-vis* other civilisations and its potential (and need) to come together in close union.

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